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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes findings of a national telephone survey of 1,032 parents of children in grades Kindergarten through 6, supplementary interviews among 375 parents, and focus-group discussions among parents. Included among the sample were African-American, Latino, Asian-American, and White parents. Several findings are elaborated: (1) parents consider themselves to be deeply involved in their children's education as defined by school-related activities in the home; (2) parents consider educational involvement in the home as more important than activities at their child's school; (3) regardless of income, race, or educational level, parents recognize the value of being involved in their child's education; (4) time, rather than logistical problems such as transportation, is the most significant barrier to greater parental involvement; (5) parents involve themselves most deeply when they see a clear and direct link between their involvement and their child's benefit; (6) the level of parental involvement declines noticeably as children grow older; and (7) parents think it is important to have a voice in making school policy, but they are wary about involvement in administrative decisions. Statistical findings indicate that at-home involvement is more important than at-school involvement, extent of family involvement, involvement in activities with clear benefits to their children, barriers to greater involvement, attitudes toward educational issues, and satisfaction with their child's schooling. (KDFB)

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A Study of Attitudes Among The Parents of Primary-School Children

Introduction

This report summarizes the findings of a recent national survey of 1,032 parents of primary-school children in grades K-through-6, as well as focus-group discussions among parents of children in the same grade levels. Trained professionals, working from a central, monitored location, conducted the telephone interviews between June 25 and July 9, 1995. The typical interview required 23 minutes to complete.

Respondents were chosen using a random digit-dialling procedure which assured that all households with telephones, both listed and unlisted, were given an equal chance of being included in the sample.

In cases where a household included more than one child in grades K-6, a computer randomly selected the grade level of one of the children. All subsequent questions referred to that child.

Supplementary interviews were conducted among African-American, Latino, and Asian-American parents, to produce a total of 125 interviews in each of these three communities. For tabulation purposes, the responses of African-American, Latino, and Asian-American parents were weighted to reflect known population figures for each of these communities.

The survey results were augmented by three focus-group discussions, which were conducted in late July. A group of African-American parents discussed the issues raised in the survey at a location in Prince George's County, Maryland, outside Washington, DC. A group of Latino parents and a group of white parents each discussed these issues at a location in Los Angeles.

Overall findings have a margin of error of +/- 3.3%, at a 95% confidence level. Within the three oversamples, the margin of error is +/- 7.5%, at a 95% confidence level.

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Overview of Findings

The results of our survey of American parents make up, in one sense, the portrait of a struggle. Parents who face countless challenges and demands at home and in the workplace -- many of them unknown to the parents of previous generations -- are struggling to meet the age-old challenge of preparing their young children to succeed in school.

The good news is that American parents are serious in their approach to this challenge. The responses to this survey, supplemented by comments made in a series of focus groups with parents of varying backgrounds, indicate that parents are devoting a great deal of time and effort to involving themselves in their children's education.

Indeed, the vast majority of parents who took part in this survey believe that they are playing a larger role in their children's education, than their parents played in their own schooling.

These findings do, however, suggest a challenge for those who seek to increase parental involvement in children's education, and to make that involvement a more effective force for improving their children's education.

Simply put: with so many parents convinced that they are *already* highly involved, how can they be shown that there are other avenues for their involvement -- and new opportunities for partnerships that unite parents, teachers, and the larger community -- which can have a tangible and significant effect on their children's education?

Looked at from another perspective: How can educators, convinced of the need that *increased and more effective* parental involvement is vitally needed, reach out to parents in a way that affirms and reinforces their current level of involvement -- and uses it as the foundation for collaborative efforts that bring parents and teachers together in new ways?

Parents consider themselves to be deeply involved in their children's education, in terms of school-related activities in the home.

By their own estimation, American parents are deeply involved in their children's education -- at least to the extent that involvement is defined in terms of activities that take place *within the home*, such as reading and checking on homework.

Parents say they are in frequent contact with their children's teachers -- though the median number of parent-teachers conversations is a modest 4.0 per year. Parents give themselves generally high grades for their efforts to promote their children's schoolwork.

Indeed, parents believe that they are more deeply involved in educational matters than their own parents were. In the focus-group discussions, parents attribute this higher level of involvement partly to demographic factors: today's families are smaller than those of a generation ago, and fewer children means that each child will inevitably get more individualized attention.

But parents also share a strong sense that their children have to contend with more homework than they themselves faced. And they agree that, in today's changing economy, the importance of succeeding in school is much greater for their children than it ever was for them.

"There's just so much more emphasis on it now," said one Latino parent, citing the need for skills to compete in the workforce. Parents in every group also stressed the abundance of greater distractions (including TV, telephone, video games, and the like) than when they were children.

There is, of course, a possibility that some respondents have overstated the level of their own involvement. However, most basic measures of parental involvement obtained in this survey are highly consistent with the results of previous surveys of American parents that were conducted in the early 1990s.

The consistency of these figures argues for them to be taken at face value. In those instances where these survey results indicate a significant increase in parental involvement -- such as in the area of parents' reading with, or to, their children -- we believe that the data fairly represent an actual increase in this activity over the last two years.

Parents draw a clear distinction between the importance of involvement *in the home* and the importance of activities *at their children's school.*

By virtually every measure, parents place a higher value on -- and devote more time to -- education-related activities that take place in the home, compared to activities that take place at their children's school.

While parents widely acknowledge that involvement of both types is important, they assign considerably higher importance to such at-home activities as checking on homework, reading with their children, talking about events in school, and simply "being there" for their children.

There is a clear disparity in the amount of time they allot to these activities, as opposed to the time they allot for such activities as talking to their children's teacher, volunteering at the school, or attending sports events and school plays.

To some extent, the greater time allotted to at-home activities is a function of routine: homework, after all, is an everyday thing, whereas school plays are not. At-school activities also require a greater investment of time, and may present logistical difficulties such as transportation problems or scheduling conflicts. Contact with teachers, in particular, requires special effort -- often at times that conflict with work and other family responsibilities.

All that being said, however, it appears that parents also distinguish between at-home involvement and at-school involvement on the level of *intrinsic value*.

Simply put, parents seem to think that at-school involvement is not only more difficult for them to do, but also *less important for their child*. This perceived distinction is, in our view, one of the most crucial public attitudes that the campaign must address in its efforts to increase parental involvement at all levels.

Regardless of income, race, or educational level, parents recognize the value of being involved in their children's education.

Parents of every race, educational background, and economic status agree on the importance of being involved in their children's education. There are only minor differences in the level of involvement reported by the parents in each of the ethnic and demographic subgroups studied in this survey. These results clearly indicate that parents of all backgrounds are concerned about -- and, by their own lights, highly involved in -- their children's education.

In some respects, parents who are less affluent or less well-educated -- most notably, women who are at home full-time -- report levels of involvement that are somewhat *higher* than those reported by more upscale parents.

Taken together, these findings indicate that parents readily accept the importance of educational involvement. They do not need to be convinced of the truth of what is, for almost all parents, a deeply shared value.

Time is the greatest barrier to greater parental involvement. Logistical problems -- including language barriers and transportational difficulties -- are not a major deterrent for most parents.

The survey results suggest that the two principal barriers to parental involvement are a general lack of time, along with parents' unfamiliarity with the way their children are being taught. The focus groups made it clear that of these two factors, the lack of time is by far the more significant problem for most parents.

Respondents spoke at length and in detail of their need to juggle competing priorities, of their exhaustion at the end of a day's work, and of other related problems that inhibit their ability to be more involved in their children's schooling. At the same time, respondents generally agreed that children would definitely benefit if their parents could spend more time involved in their schooling.

The perceived difficulty of finding time is greater among less affluent and less well-educated parents. These parents, along with those in the African-American and Latino communities, are also more likely to face a related barrier: the difficulty of getting time off from work to participate in events at their children's schools.

These parents place the same high value on being involved that other parents do -- and as a result, their level of involvement is just as high. But involvement represents more of a struggle for them, than for more upscale parents and those who are not members of minority communities.

Significantly, none of the logistical issues tested in our survey emerged as a major barrier to parental involvement. Obviously, different groups of parents face different obstacles to further involvement: Latino and Asian-American parents were more likely to mention language barriers, and city residents were more likely to cite the difficulty or the danger of travelling to their children's school.

By and large, however, these groups of parents mirror the attitudes of all the other parents in this survey: whatever specific problems they may face in their individual circumstances, those problems are less pressing than the general lack of time that bedevils all parents in these modern times.

Parents involve themselves most deeply when they see a clear and direct link between their own involvement, and their children's benefit.

At the most elemental level, parents get involved in their children's education for an exceedingly simple reason: they want to help their children. Thus, it stands to reason that they will be most intensely involved in those areas that they believe will provide their children with the most help.

Both the survey findings and the focus-group discussions support this conclusion. Parents spend more time on activities that they see as having a direct link to academic performance -- such as reading, helping with homework, and speaking with their children's teachers -- and less time on activities, such as attending school plays, where the link to academic performance is less clear.

In addition, they are more involved when their children are younger, and presumably most in need of help; they become less involved as their children grow older and, presumably, are less needful of assistance.

The focus-group discussions suggested two principal reasons that motivate parents to become involved in at-school activities.

To begin, many parents feel obliged to attend events at school -- such as plays or sporting events, in which their children are involved -- to provide moral support and enhance their children's self-esteem. In addition, they often feel compelled to engage in other activities -- such as fundraising, or volunteering time at school events -- as a way to show school officials that their child has a parent who cares enough to be involved.

In that sense, this form of parental involvement is a form of "marketing" one's child, and is seen by many parents as a way of seeing to it that their children are not overlooked.

The level of parental involvement declines noticeably as children grow older.

Parents of older children -- those in the fifth and sixth grades -- are noticeably less involved in their children's education, than are the parents of children in kindergarten and the first grade.

This is not because the parents of older children believe the idea of parental involvement is any less important than the parents of younger children believe it to be. Indeed, parents of older children place the same high value on parental involvement that other parents do.

And yet these parents not only devote fewer hours per week to their children's education than do the parents of younger children, they also speak with their children's teachers far less frequently.

As the focus-group discussions made clear, parents firmly believe that younger children are much more in need of their hands-on help and involvement -- particularly in such areas as reading.

The survey data show that the level of hands-on involvement -- such as reading or helping a child with a writing assignment -- declines sharply among parents of fifth- and sixth-graders. To the extent that speaking with their children's teachers may also be seen as yet another form of "hands-on" involvement, the decline in parent-teacher conversations is consistent with these other findings.

The level of what might be called "supervisory involvement" -- which includes such activities as checking to see that homework is completed, or discussing the day's events at school -- also declines among the parents of older children, but much less sharply than is the case with forms of hands-on involvement.

Parents think it is important for them to have a voice in making school policy -- but they are wary about getting involved in administrative decisions.

There is no question that most parents seek a voice in how their children's schools are run. But there is no consensus about how loud that voice ought to be.

While parents think it is important that they be involved in setting overall school policy, they voice some doubts about whether it is advisable for parents to have a say in hiring decisions, budget-setting, and other administrative matters. For the most part, parents are more comfortable with playing a role that involves broad input into areas that affect what their children will learn -- such as advising on curriculum matters and helping to select books for the school library.

The focus-group discussions served to highlight the lack of consensus on these issues. While each group included some strong proponents of heavy parental involvement in school-governance issues, each also included a few parents who questioned whether parents might become too involved in nitty-gritty details that are often better left to professional educators.

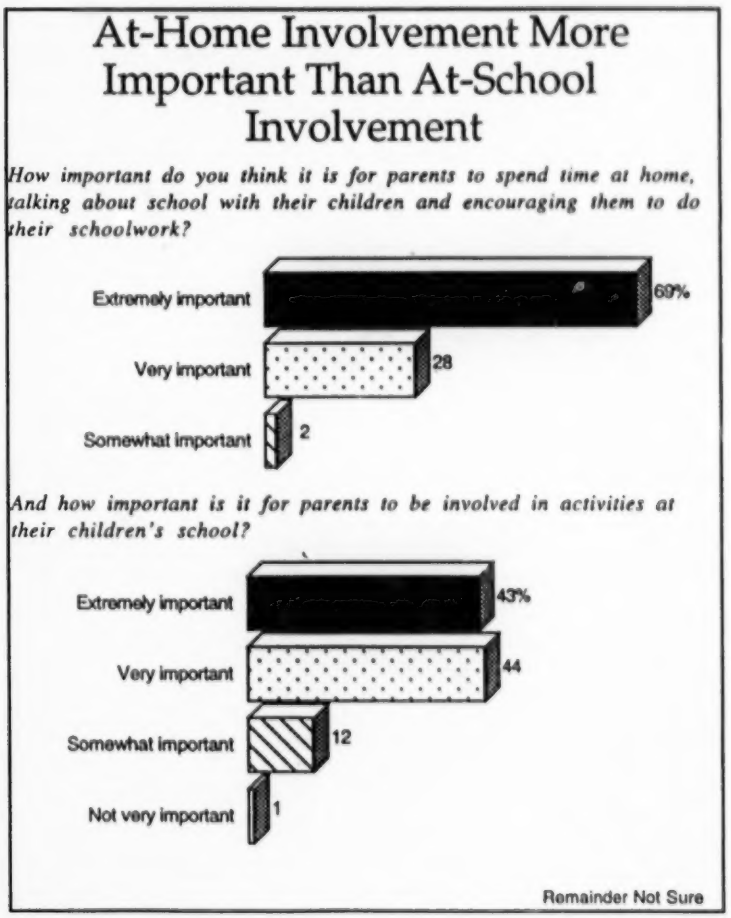
The focus-group discussions also raised a common problem: the tendency, when parents become heavily involved in advisory boards or governance panels, for such groups to divide into cliques that may distort the parents' voice in policy-making decisions.

Based on these results, it appears that the question of parental involvement in school governance is one that needs to be addressed on a localized basis that takes local attitudes, customs, and political circumstances into full account.

Selected Findings

Importance of Family Involvement

Parents acknowledge the critical importance of involving themselves with their children's education. But they see a significant difference between at-home involvement, and activities at their children's school -- with the latter viewed as less important.


At-Home Involvement More Important Than At-School Involvement
How important do you think it is for parents to spend time at home, talking about school with their children and encouraging them to do their schoolwork?
Extremely important
69%
Very important
28
Somewhat important
2
And how important is it for parents to be involved in activities at their children's school?
Extremely important
43%
Very important
44
Somewhat important
12
Not very important
1
Remainder Not Sure

- 69% of parents say it is "extremely important" for parents to spend time at home, encouraging their children in their schoolwork. There is no significant difference between parents of various ethnic and racial subgroups on this issue.

- By contrast, only 43% of all parents think it is "extremely important" for them to be involved in activities *at their children's schools.*

- Parents see their involvement in "activities at their children's school" as less effective than other ways of helping their children to do better in school. 62% of parents say that such at-school involvement represents a very effective way of boosting their children's performance at school.

- But several forms of at-home involvement -- including reading with children (91%), helping with homework (85%), and discussing grades (72%) -- are seen as significantly more effective.

- Parents give themselves the best grades for spending the time to help their children with homework: 56% give themselves an A in this area and 34% give themselves a B, for an average grade of B+. Parents also give themselves a B+ for talking with their children about their performance in school.

Lower Grades For At-School Involvement

I'd like to ask how good a job you think you're doing in each of those areas. This time, for each item I mention, please tell me whether you would give yourself an A, for excellent, in that area; a B; a C; a D; or an F, which is a failing grade.

	A	B	C	D	F	Overall Grade
Spending time helping your child with homework.	56%	34	8	1	*	B+
Talking to your child about grades.	55%	31	9	1	1	B+
Staying in touch with your child's teachers.	51%	30	14	3	2	B/B+
Reading to, or with, your child.	48%	35	12	2	1	B/B+
Limiting the amount of time your child can watch TV or play video games.	29%	37	24	6	3	B-
Spending time involved in activities at your child's school.	27%	35	25	8	4	C+

- Parents give themselves solid grades for staying in touch with their children's teachers: 51% A, 30% B, for an average grade of B/B+. This grade might strike many as overly generous, in light of the fact that a majority of parents spoke with their child's teacher only five times or fewer during the last school year.

- Parents give themselves much lower grades for limiting their children's television-watching (29% As and 24% Cs, for an average grade of B-), and their lowest grades for spending time in activities at their children's school (27% As and 25% Cs, for an average grade of C+).

Extent of Family Involvement

Parents report spending more than seven hours per week directly involved in their children's education. Parents become less involved as their children grow older.

- Parents report spending a mean of 7.14 hours per week involved in their children's education. The *median* time allotted for involvement in school-related matters is 5.0 hours.

- There is virtually no difference between the average amount of time allotted by parents who are married (7.15 hours per week) and parents who are not currently married (7.12 hours per week).

- Parents of children in grades 5-6 devote less time per week (6.73 hours) than do parents of children in grades K-1 (7.32 hours) or parents of children in grades 2-4 (7.25 hours).

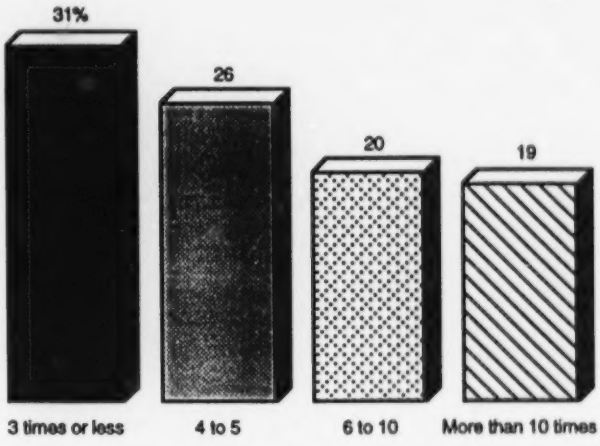
- A majority of parents (58%) spoke with their children's teacher five times or fewer during the last school year. **[See chart, next page.]** The median number of parent-teacher conversations is 4.0. The question that elicited these findings was designed to include telephone conversations as well as face-to-face meetings.

- Parents of children in grades 5-6 spoke with their child's teachers less frequently than did the parents of younger children.

- 65% of parents say that they spend more time involved with their children's education, than their parents spent involved in *their* education. Only 6% say that they are *less* involved in their kids' education than their own parents were with theirs.

Contact With Children's Teacher

During the last school year, about how many times did you speak with your child's teacher about how your child is doing in school -- again, just your best guess?



Parents' top priority is checking on, and helping with, homework -- but a majority of parents also say that they read with their children almost every day.

- 79% of parents check to see that their children have completed their homework nearly every day, and 63% help their children with homework on a near-daily basis. **[See chart, next page.]**

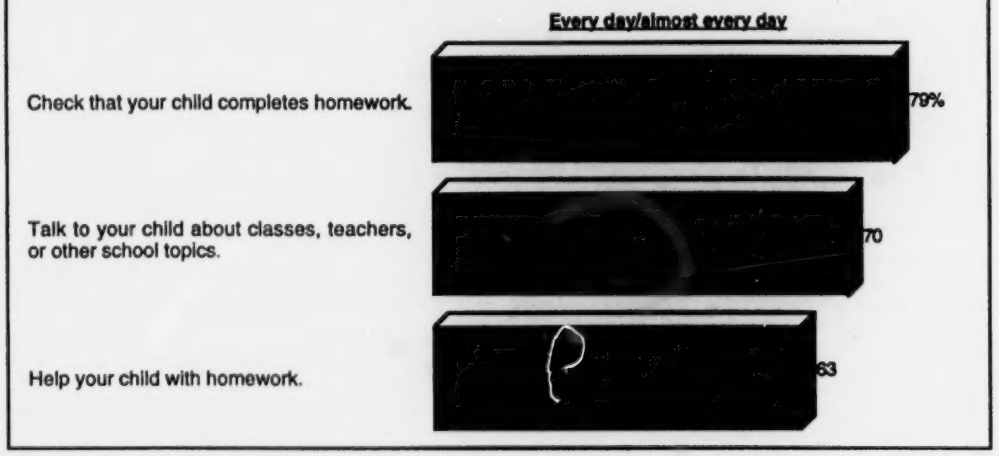
- 71% of all parents say they discuss school-related topics with their children on a near-daily basis.

- In general, the parents of children in grades 5-6 are noticeably less likely to engage in each of these forms of at-home activities, than are parents of schoolchildren in lower grades.

- 52% of say that they read to or with their children nearly every school day. But parents of children in grades 5-6 are significantly less likely to read to or with their child every day (26%) than are parents of children in grades K-1 (74%) or grades 2-4 (52%).

Homework Comes First

I'm going to mention some specific ways that parents can be involved with their children's education. For each one I mention, please tell me how often you do this with your child -- is this something you do every, or almost every, school day; two or three times a week; about once a week; about two or three times a month; or less than that?


Every day/almost every day
Check that your child completes homework.
79%
Talk to your child about classes, teachers, or other school topics.
70
Help your child with homework.
63

In terms of involvement *outside* the home, parents tend to become most involved in activities that clearly and directly benefit their own children.

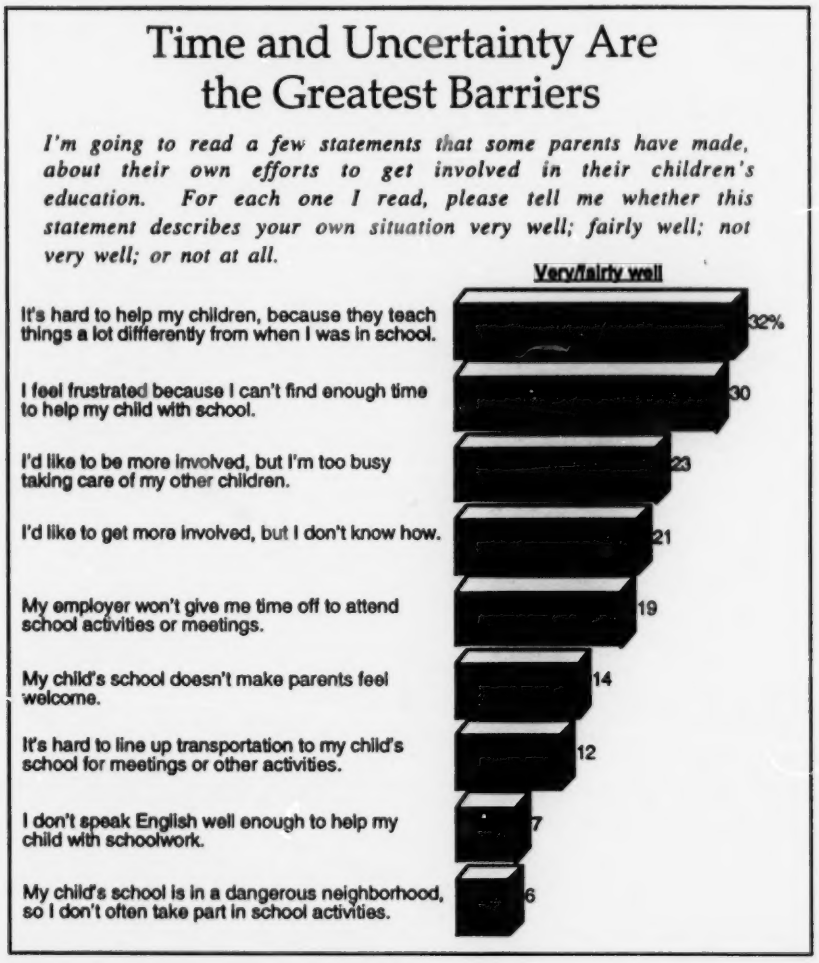
- 74% of parents say they have gone to school to attend a meeting with their children's parent or teacher more than once during the last school year. Another 50% say they attended an school Open House or Back-to-School Night more than once in the last year.

- In general, parents define their at-school involvement mainly in terms of meetings with their children's teacher or principal. This is consistent with the view that parents are most involved in those areas that, in their view, have a direct impact on their children's academic progress.

- When it comes to involvement that transcends the interests of their individual children, parents are most likely to be involved in school fundraising and active in their local PTA or PTO. 69% of parents say they have helped raise money for their children's school, and 48% say they have been active in the school's PTA or PTO.

Barriers to Involvement

The single greatest barrier to increased parental involvement is the lack of parental *time*. Unfamiliarity with new teaching methods, and uncertainty about how to get more involved, are cited more frequently than language barriers or transportation problems.


Time and Uncertainty Are the Greatest Barriers
I'm going to read a few statements that some parents have made, about their own efforts to get involved in their children's education. For each one I read, please tell me whether this statement describes your own situation very well; fairly well; not very well; or not at all.
Very/fairly well
It's hard to help my children, because they teach things a lot diffferently from when I was in school.
32%
I feel frustrated because I can't find enough time to help my child with school.
30
I'd like to be more involved, but I'm too busy taking care of my other children.
23
I'd like to get more involved, but I don't know how.
21
My employer won't give me time off to attend school activities or meetings.
19
My child's school doesn't make parents feel welcome.
14
It's hard to line up transportation to my child's school for meetings or other activities.
12
I don't speak English well enough to help my child with schoolwork.
7
My child's school is in a dangerous neighborhood, so I don't often take part in school activities.
6

- Fully 30% of parents say they "feel frustrated because I can't find enough time to help my children with school." Another 23% specifically cite the difficulties created by the demands of raising other children. Taken together, these figures confirm the point made repeatedly during the focus-group discussions: the idea that the lack of time is the single greatest barrier to parental involvement.

- 19% of parents agree that they have problems attending events at school because they can't get time off from work.

- Work conflicts pose a greater barrier for less affluent parents: 24% of parents earning less than $30,000 per year cite this difficulty, compared to only 7% of parents earning more than $75,000 per year.

- Work conflicts are also cited by 26% of African-American parents and 25% of Latino parents. Again, African-American and Latino parents are as involved in their children's education as other parents are -- despite the greater difficulty that they encounter in doing so.

- 32% of all parents say they find it hard to help their children because "they teach things a lot differently from when I was in school." One-of-five parents (21%) say they would be more involved if they know how to go about it.

- Only 14% of parents say that their children's schools do not make them feel welcome -- though this complaint is more frequently among African-Americans (21%) and twice as often among Latinos (29%).

- Transportation problems pose a barrier for only 12% of all parents -- but 27% of Latino parents, and 17% of African-American parents, say that it is difficult to line up transportation to their children's schools.

- Only 7% of all parents say that language problems deter them from helping their children with homework. The language barrier is a more significant hurdle for Asian-American parents (24%) and Latino parents (22%).

Attitudes Toward Educational Issues

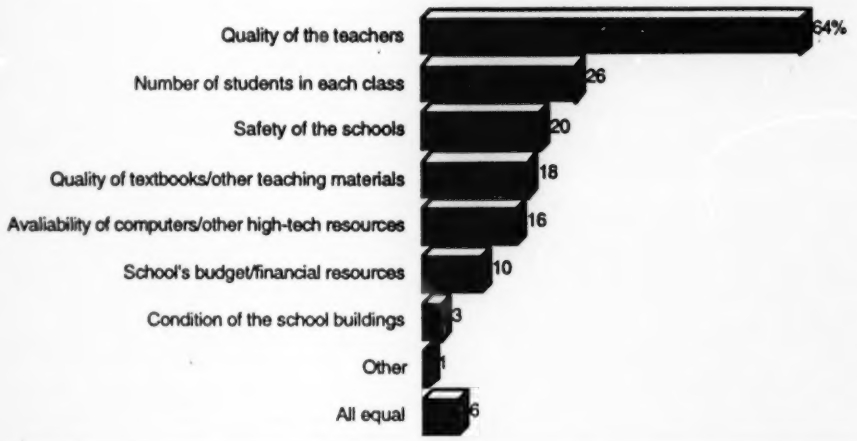
In assessing their children's education, parents are far more concerned with the quality of their children's teachers, than with issues such as class size.

- Just under two-of-three (64%) parents consider the quality of teachers to be a major factor in determining educational quality. **[See chart, next page.]**

- This issue far outweighs class size (26%) in importance. The level of concern about school safety (20%) is also quite high, in the context of a question that emphasizes educational rather than social issues.

Parents See Teachers As The Key

I'm going to list several issues that can affect the quality of a child's education. Please listen to the list, and then tell me which one or two issues are the most important concerns for you when you think about your child's education.



- Better than seven-of-ten (71%) parents expect their children to earn a college degree, and fully 25% expect that their children will earn a post-graduate degree. Only a tiny percentage say that they do not expect their children to finish high school.

- Expectations are slightly higher among African-American and Latino parents, than among the population of parents as a whole. Fully 76% of African-American parents, and 73% of Latino parents, expect their children to be graduated from a four-year college.

- Almost three-of-ten (29%) Latino parents expect their children to earn a post-graduate degree, while 37% of African-American parents express the same high expectation of their children. A majority (54%) of Asian-American parents expect their child to earn an advanced or post-graduate degree.

Most American parents are satisfied with the schooling their children are currently receiving. They believe it is important for parents to have a say in making decision about school policy.

- Better than seven-of-ten parents (72%) rate their local public-school system as "good" or "excellent."

- In terms of *their own* experience, nine-of-ten (89%) parents express satisfaction with the education their children are receiving.